

Meeting of:	EDUCATION AND YOUTH SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Date of Meeting:	21 SEPTEMBER 2026
Report Title:	REVIEW OF ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS (ALN) SUPPORT
Report Owner: Responsible Chief Officer / Cabinet Member	CORPORATE DIRECTOR EDUCATION, EARLY YEARS AND YOUNG PEOPLE
Responsible Officer:	GROUP MANAGER (INCLUSION)
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	There is no effect upon the Policy Framework and Procedure Rules.
Executive Summary:	This report provides an overview of the effectiveness of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) support across Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC). It highlights the successful implementation of ALN Reform, positive findings from the March 2026 Estyn inspection of BCBC's education services, which identified ALN provision as a substantial strength, and progress in delivering the ALN Provision Plan 2025-2030 to address increasing demand for specialist support and provision. The report also outlines the contribution of school modernisation to ALN sufficiency planning and the challenges associated with rising levels and complexity of need, workforce capacity and financial pressures. Despite these challenges, BCBC remains committed to delivering high-quality, inclusive and sustainable ALN provision that enables children and young people to achieve positive outcomes within their local communities wherever possible.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Education and Youth Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the effectiveness of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) support across Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC), including the quality of provision, progress in implementing ALN Reform, findings from the March 2026 Estyn inspection of BCBC's local government education

services, progress against Well-being Objective Commitment WBO4.4.2 to develop a five-year plan to meet increasing demand on support services, specialist provision and schools, the contribution of school modernisation activity to ALN sufficiency planning, performance against Indicator DEFS170, and the financial pressures associated with delivering ALN provision.

2. Background

- 2.1 BCBC has fully implemented the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales. All statements of Special Educational Needs have transferred to Individual Development Plans (IDPs) within statutory timescales and all early years children requiring a local authority-maintained plan now have an IDP in place.
- 2.2 The Council's ALN Strategy 2024 is based upon the principles of:
- rights-based practice;
 - early identification and intervention;
 - inclusive education;
 - collaboration; and
 - a bilingual education system.
- 2.3 ALN support is delivered through extensive partnership working between schools, Health, early years providers, further education institutions, Careers Wales, social care services and third-sector organisations including SNAP Cymru. Specialist support is co-ordinated through the Inclusion Group, which comprises the local authority's Educational Psychology Service (EPS), ALN Statutory Team, Communication and Relationships Team (CART), Cognition and Learning Team, Complex Medical and Motor Impairment Team (CMMI), Post-16, Hearing and Vision Impairment Services and the Early Years ALN Team.
- 2.4 To support future demand, an ALN Provision Plan 2025-2030 under Commitment WBO4.4.2 has been developed to ensure that provision and services remain sufficient and sustainable over the coming five years.

3. Current situation/ proposal

Effectiveness of ALN Support, Estyn Evaluation

3.1 In March 2026, Estyn identified provision for children and young people with ALN as a substantial strength of BCBC. Inspectors reported that inclusion is central to the local authority's work and highlighted strong leadership, effective partnership working and high-quality specialist provision.

3.2 Estyn concluded that:

- children and young people can access specialist provision that effectively meets their needs;
- learners with complex needs generally make strong progress from their starting points;
- specialist provision is wide-ranging and of high quality;
- Welsh-medium ALN provision is a notable strength;
- early years identification and intervention arrangements are particularly effective;
- local authority officers provide valued support and challenge to schools; and
- collaborative working between schools and specialist teams supports positive outcomes for learners.

3.3 The inspection also recognised the work of the CART, the EPS and specialist teachers in supporting schools and improving learner engagement, attendance and behaviour.

Early identification and intervention

3.4 The Authority operates robust systems for the early identification of need through its Early Years Panel, which acts as a multi-agency single point of access for children with emerging or complex needs. The Panel facilitates assessment, intervention and transition planning and supports informed decisions regarding provision and IDPs.

- 3.5 Educational psychologists and specialist services work closely with families and providers from an early age. During recent years:
- between 43 and 48 children annually have held local authority maintained early years IDPs;
 - around 35 children each year receive enhanced specialist support packages; and
 - Early Years Panel numbers continue to increase, reflecting rising levels of need and complexity.
- 3.6 Estyn highlighted this preventative approach as a significant strength and recognised the quality of transition arrangements from non-maintained settings into school.

Quality assurance and ALN reform

- 3.7 The Inclusion Group has established robust quality assurance arrangements to support the effective implementation of ALN Reform and to ensure that learners receive high-quality, person-centred support. A weekly ALN Quality Assurance Sub-Group reviews local authority-maintained IDPs, scrutinising statutory compliance, the quality of outcomes, the appropriateness of Additional Learning Provision (ALP), and the integration of multi-agency advice. Specialist setting IDPs are also subject to peer review processes to promote consistency and continuous improvement across provision.
- 3.8 The local authority continues to demonstrate strong compliance with the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and the ALN Code. All former Statements of Special Educational Needs transferred to IDPs within statutory timescales and all early years children requiring local authority-maintained plans now have an IDP in place.
- 3.9 Professional learning remains a key priority in strengthening inclusive practice. Schools are supported through termly ALN Co-ordinator (ALNCo) forums, bespoke training on person-centred planning and IDP development, the ALN Reform Hwb, Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) training and supervision, and a range of wellbeing and attendance initiatives delivered through the EPS. These

approaches have strengthened school capacity to meet a wider range of learner needs within mainstream settings.

3.10 Between September 2025 and August 2026:

- 217 learners were considered by the ALN Panel;
- 56 learners were supported into appropriate specialist provision; and
- 187 cases were resolved through collaborative intervention without escalation.

3.11 During the same period:

- 605 local authority-maintained IDPs were in place; and
- 431 IDPs were quality assured through the authority's formal review processes.

3.12 Estyn recognised the effective support provided to schools in implementing ALN Reform and highlighted the positive impact of professional learning and collaborative working arrangements in improving outcomes for learners with ALN.

Special schools and the pupil referral unit (PRU)

3.13 The quality and impact of Bridgend's special school and alternative provision have also been recognised through Estyn. Heronsbridge School was inspected by Estyn in October 2023 and received no recommendations, reflecting the strength of provision and outcomes for learners. The school has subsequently been featured in Estyn Spotlight reports for its curriculum and professional learning arrangements.

3.14 The Bridge Alternative Provision Portfolio (PRU) was inspected in January 2025 and was commended through Estyn Spotlight features on Well-being, Care, Support and Guidance, Therapeutic Support, and Equity of Curriculum Offer, recognising its exceptional care, therapeutic approach, inclusive curriculum and effective support for vulnerable learners.

3.15 Ysgol Bryn Castell (YBC) was identified during Estyn's local authority inspection as an important contributor to the local authority's strong inclusive practice and has also been featured in Estyn Spotlight work on Developing a Committed Staff Team, highlighting the school's effective distributed leadership, staff well-being initiatives and strong capacity for continuous improvement.

- 3.16 Learners attending special schools and the PRU continue to achieve positive outcomes in relation to engagement, attendance, personal development and progression. Heronsbridge School has maintained consistently strong attendance over recent years, increasing from 87.1% in 2023-24 to 88.5% in 2024-25 and 89.6% in 2025-26. Pupils continue to achieve a wide range of accredited outcomes and enrichment opportunities, including the school's first ever Silver Duke of Edinburgh Awards, alongside national recognition for its commitment to wellbeing through achieving the Carnegie Centre of Excellence Gold School Mental Health Award.
- 3.17 YBC continues to support learners with complex social, emotional, behavioural and autistic spectrum needs to make progress against their individual targets and prepare successfully for adulthood. Attendance improved across a number of pupil groups during 2024-25, including a significant increase for looked after children from 66.0% to 75.7%. Comparative data for school year 2025-26 was not available at the time of writing the report. The school reports consistently high rates of progress against individual learning targets, with approximately 80% of targets achieved during each review cycle and very small numbers requiring significant amendment. The majority of learners continue into further education, training, employment or Post-16 provision, with very low levels of young people becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET).
- 3.18 The Bridge Alternative Provision Portfolio PRU also demonstrates positive outcomes for vulnerable learners who are at risk of disengagement from education. During the inspection The Bridge reported 33% of primary school-aged learners and 62% of secondary school-aged learners supported through The Bridge successfully reintegrated into mainstream education, with others progressing into specialist provision that more appropriately met their needs. Estyn recognised the quality of therapeutic support, inclusive practice and reintegration pathways available through the provision.
- 3.19 Feedback from learners, families, schools and partner agencies indicates a high level of confidence in the local authority's approach to supporting children and young people with ALN. Learners are actively involved in decision-making through person-centred planning processes, while parents and carers continue to value the

collaborative approach adopted by the authority and its partners. Schools report that specialist services, including the EPS, CART, Cognition and Learning, CMMI and Sensory Services, provide valuable support to inclusive practice. Health services and Careers Wales similarly recognise the strength of partnership working, particularly in relation to early identification, transition planning and preparation for adulthood.

Performance against DEFS170

- 3.20 Performance Indicator DEFS170 measures the percentage of new local authority IDPs delivered through the online IDP system.
- 3.21 The local authority has embedded digital IDP processes as part of ALN Reform implementation. The online system supports:
- improved statutory compliance;
 - stronger quality assurance;
 - greater consistency of documentation; and
 - more effective monitoring and reporting.
- 3.22 Performance against DEFS170 continues to improve and the majority of new local authority maintained IDPs are now produced through the online system. This has strengthened consistency and efficiency in managing statutory processes. While full use of the online IDP system has been delayed by system issues, it does not impact on decision-making or provision for any pupils. Inclusion Group officers continue to work with the system operator to overcome issues encountered in accessing the system by some school staff. Previous difficulties downloading completed IDPs has now been addressed.

Sufficiency of ALN provision and progress against WBO4.4.2

- 3.23 The ALN Provision Plan 2025-2030 provides the framework for responding to increasing demand for support services, specialist placements and school-based provision.

3.24 Progress includes successful growth bids approved by Council for the following additional specialist provision, with a proposed stakeholder consultation period taking place in October 2026, subject to approval by Cabinet at its meeting on the 22 September 2026:

- development of additional Foundation Phase Communication, Autism Resource Education (CARE) provision.
- expansion of Key Stage 2 CARE provision.
- progression of a secondary CARE base at Porthcawl Comprehensive School.
- expansion opportunities at Litchard Primary School and Llangewydd Junior School.
- development of a Welsh-medium Observation and Assessment Class included in the new build for Ysgol Bro Ogwr.

3.25 The Authority is also undertaking a review of emotional, social and behavioural difficulties (ESBD) provision alongside YBC and The Bridge Alternative Provision Portfolio to increase capacity, reduce waiting times and improve pathways for learners.

3.26 Estyn recognised the strength of current specialist provision but acknowledged that demand continues to increase and that current capacity does not yet fully meet projected future need.

Impact of school modernisation (WBO3.4)

3.27 School modernisation activity is supporting the local authority's ALN sufficiency strategy through the creation of specialist learning environments and identification of accommodation suitable for expanded provision.

3.28 This work is supporting:

- additional specialist classes;
- expansion of CARE provision;
- development of Welsh-medium specialist provision;
- future ESBD accommodation solutions; and
- increased capacity to educate learners closer to home.

- 3.29 Estyn highlighted the local authority's strong approach to linking capital investment with improved educational provision and inclusive practice.

Areas for further development

- 3.30 The local authority has identified the following priorities:
- expanding specialist provision capacity to meet increasing demand;
 - continuing delivery of the ALN Provision Plan 2025-2030;
 - improving consistency of school-maintained IDPs;
 - strengthening nurture and emotional wellbeing provision.;
 - extending trauma-informed practice across schools
 - implementing a single point of access approach through the Wellbeing, Care, Support and Guidance Panel.
 - finalising revised specialist placement criteria.
 - finalising arrangements with Health for specialist speech and language services.
 - ensuring long-term sustainability of specialist support services including CART.
 - strengthening neuroinclusive practice in schools through implementation of the National Autistic Society's Neuroinclusive Education Programme.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

- 4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

- 5.1 The work undertaken to support children and young people with ALN contributes directly to the Well-being Goals set out within the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and supports Corporate Well-being Objectives, particularly the

commitment to ensure that all children and young people have the best possible start in life and are able to achieve their full potential. The approach to ALN support reflects the five ways of working as follows:

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| Long term | The Council's ALN Provision Plan 2025-2030 and wider inclusion strategy seek to ensure that sufficient, sustainable and high-quality provision is available to meet increasing levels of need over the longer term. Investment in local specialist provision, workforce development and inclusive practice aims to improve outcomes for children and young people while reducing reliance on more costly out-of-county placements. |
| Prevention | Early identification and intervention are central principles of the Council's ALN approach. Through arrangements such as the Early Years Panel, EPS and specialist inclusion teams, support is provided at the earliest opportunity to prevent needs escalating and to maximise children and young people's educational, social and emotional development. |
| Integration | The delivery of ALN support contributes to a more equal, healthier and cohesive county borough by promoting inclusive education and enabling learners to access appropriate support within their local communities wherever possible. The approach supports wider educational, social care, health and wellbeing objectives across the Council and partner organisations. |
| Collaboration | Effective ALN provision relies upon strong partnership working between schools, families, health services, social care, early years providers, further education institutions and third-sector organisations. Collaborative working supports a coordinated and person-centred approach to meeting the needs of children and young people with ALN. |
| Involvement | The principles underpinning the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 place children, young people and their families at the centre of decision-making. The Council's approach promotes participation and co-production, ensuring that the views, wishes and feelings of learners and their |

families inform assessment, planning and review processes through IDPs.

6. Climate Change and Nature Implications

- 6.1 The Council's approach to developing ALN provision has the potential to deliver positive climate change benefits through its commitment to increasing local specialist capacity and enabling more children and young people to access appropriate education within their own communities.
- 6.2 The expansion of specialist provision, including CARE classes, Welsh-medium specialist provision and other local placements identified within the ALN Provision Plan 2025-2030, is intended to reduce the need for learners to travel longer distances to access suitable educational provision. This may contribute to a reduction in transport-related carbon emissions associated with home-to-school travel and specialist transport arrangements.
- 6.3 The Council's school modernisation programme also provides opportunities to improve the sustainability and accessibility of educational environments through investment in modern facilities that are better equipped to meet the needs of learners with ALN within their local communities.
- 6.4 There are no direct adverse climate change or nature implications arising from this report. However, ongoing development of local specialist provision supports the Council's wider objectives of reducing unnecessary travel whilst promoting inclusive, community-based education.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

- 7.1 The directorate has a robust approach to safeguarding, and this is detailed within the directorate's strategic plan. The Education, Early Years and Young People Directorate Strategic Plan 2023-2026 is aligned with Bridgend County Borough Council's (BCBC's) Corporate Parenting Strategy.

8. Financial Implications

Financial pressures and rising costs of ALN Provision

- 8.1 While Estyn identified ALN provision in Bridgend as a substantial strength, the local authority continues to face significant financial pressures associated with increasing demand, greater complexity of need and the expectation that provision remains inclusive, high quality and delivered as close to home as possible. Estyn recognised that increasing demand, workforce capacity pressures and financial challenges present risks to the sustainability of specialist inclusion services.
- 8.2 The number of children and young people presenting with complex additional learning needs continues to increase across all phases of education. Rising demand is evident through increasing referrals to specialist services, growing numbers discussed through Early Years and ALN Panels, increased requests for specialist placements and the expansion of specialist provision across the county borough.

Growth in ALN Expenditure and Demand Pressures

- 8.3 Over the last four financial years, expenditure on ALN services has increased significantly, reflecting rising demand for specialist support, increasing complexity of learner needs and the continued expansion of local provision. Net ALN expenditure, after accounting for recoupment income, increased from £6.47 million in 2022-23 to £9.44 million in 2025-26, representing an overall increase of around 46%.
- 8.4 The largest area of expenditure relates to Schools ALN Provision, which increased from £3.56 million in 2022-23 to £5.00 million in 2025-26. This reflects growth in specialist staffing, ancillary staff support, sensory and communication services, autism provision and specialist support delivered within mainstream schools.
- 8.5 Expenditure on Education Other Than At School (EOTAS) provision and alternative provision increased from £1.48 million to £1.79 million over the same period. Recoupment expenditure also increased significantly from £1.14 million to £2.15 million, reflecting increased costs associated with specialist placements and

provision commissioned from outside the local authority. Whilst recoupment income partially offsets these costs, expenditure growth has exceeded income generation throughout the period.

8.6 The table below summarises expenditure across key ALN service areas.

Service Area	2022-23 (£)	2023-24 (£)	2024-25 (£)	2025-26 (£)
ALN Central Services	520,669	686,890	485,997	753,216
Schools ALN Provision	3,556,967	4,060,200	3,521,033	5,001,885
Educational Psychology Service	369,069	397,490	372,827	364,814
ALN Statutory Team	149,737	175,051	178,128	142,570
EOTAS / Alternative Provision	1,480,021	1,589,337	1,528,915	1,788,713
Recoupment Expenditure	1,135,998	1,693,539	2,022,748	2,147,697
Less Recoupment Income	(746,356)	(707,958)	(992,907)	(755,223)
Net Total ALN Expenditure	6,466,105	7,894,549	7,116,740	9,443,671

8.7 Welsh Government grant funding continues to make a significant contribution towards the development of ALN provision within Bridgend County Borough. The local authority's ALN Delivery Plan outlines how grant funding will be used to increase specialist provision capacity, strengthen inclusive practice, enhance workforce capability and improve outcomes for learners with ALN. Welsh Government also provides demand-led funding to support the local authority statutory responsibilities in relation to specialist post-16 ALN placements.

8.8 In addition to revenue grant funding, Welsh Government-supported ALN sufficiency projects are forecast to receive investment of approximately £907,803 during 2026-27. This includes the expansion of provision at Ysgol Bryn Castell (£600,000), development of a secondary CARE base (£100,000), establishment of a Foundation Phase CARE Learning Resource Centre (£100,000), additional observation and assessment provision at Tondy Primary School (£45,000) and expansion works associated with Heronsbridge School (£62,803). While some schemes experienced delays due to consultation, governance and planning processes, the programme

demonstrates the scale of investment required to respond to rising demand for specialist ALN provision across the county borough. These schemes are intended to increase local capacity, improve access to specialist provision and reduce reliance on higher-cost external placements.

- 8.9 Welsh Government requires the local authority to submit an annual ALN Delivery Plan and provide regular monitoring information demonstrating both expenditure and impact. Performance measures include increases in local provision capacity, improved quality of Individual Development Plans, strengthened mainstream inclusion, reductions in demand for specialist and out-of-county placements, and improved learner attendance, engagement, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Specialist staffing costs

- 8.10 A significant proportion of ALN expenditure relates to specialist staffing. The local authority maintains a range of specialist services including:
- EPS;
 - CART)
 - Cognition and Learning Team;
 - Complex Medical and Motor Impairment Team (CMMI);
 - Hearing Impairment and Vision Impairment Services;
 - Early Years ALN Team;
 - Post-16 and Additional Learning Provision; and
 - ALN Statutory Team.
- 8.11 Demand for these services continues to grow as increasing numbers of children require specialist assessment, advice, intervention and support. This places pressure on staffing capacity and increases workforce costs associated with recruitment, retention, training and service delivery. Estyn specifically identified workforce and capacity pressures as a risk to the sustainability of inclusion services, particularly CART.

Increasing costs within schools

8.12 Schools are experiencing increased expenditure in supporting learners with ALN within mainstream settings. Costs include:

- additional learning support assistants;
- specialist teaching support;
- nurture and wellbeing interventions;
- trauma-informed approaches;
- specialist equipment and assistive technology;
- adaptations to learning environments;
- training and professional development for staff; and
- increased pastoral and emotional wellbeing support.

8.13 The local authority's strategic priority remains to support learners within inclusive local settings wherever possible. While this approach improves outcomes and reduces reliance on external placements, it requires continued investment in school-based support and workforce development.

Specialist provision expansion

8.14 As part of the ALN Provision Plan 2025-2030, the Authority is progressing additional specialist provision including new CARE classes, Observation and Assessment provision, Welsh-medium specialist provision and future ESBD developments. These initiatives are in progress following successful pressure bids and investment in accommodation, staffing, equipment and ongoing operational costs.

8.15 Although these developments represent an initial financial commitment, they are intended to increase local capacity, improve access to provision and reduce longer-term dependency upon more expensive specialist placements outside the county borough.

Transport costs

8.16 The local authority continues to provide specialist transport arrangements for pupils whose needs require access to specialist provision. Costs include:

- specialist transport contracts;
- passenger assistants and escorts;
- wheelchair accessible vehicles;
- individual risk-assessed transport arrangements; and
- transport to specialist placements both within and outside the county borough.

8.17 These costs have increased as the number and complexity of learners requiring specialist support has grown.

Out-of-county placements

8.18 Where a learner's needs cannot be met through local provision, specialist placements outside the authority may be required. Such placements typically attract significantly higher education, care and transport costs.

8.19 The local authority has therefore prioritised increasing local specialist capacity. Estyn recognised this approach as a significant strength and noted that strong governance and oversight arrangements have enabled most learners with ALN to be educated appropriately within Bridgend, reducing reliance on costly out-of-county provision.

Investment in prevention and early intervention

8.20 BCBC continues to invest in preventative approaches designed to reduce future pressures on specialist services. Examples include:

- early Years Panel arrangements;
- educational Psychology support;
- CART intervention;
- ELSA training;
- trauma-informed practice;
- the "Join the Dots"/Wellbeing, Care, Support and Guidance initiative; and
- additional inclusion earmarked reserve funding of £1 million to support schools and reduce exclusions.

8.21 While these initiatives require upfront investment, their purpose is to strengthen mainstream inclusion, reduce escalation of need and limit demand for higher-cost specialist placements over time.

Medium-term financial position

8.22 The ALN Provision Plan 2025-2030 has been developed to provide a sustainable response to increasing demand. However, continued growth in complexity and volume of need will require careful monitoring of:

- specialist staffing capacity;
- sufficiency of specialist provision;
- mainstream school support requirements;
- transport costs;
- placement expenditure; and
- capital investment requirements linked to school modernisation and specialist accommodation.

8.23 The challenge for the local authority over the next five years will be to maintain the high-quality ALN provision recognised by Estyn while ensuring that services remain financially sustainable and capable of responding to increasing demand.

9. Recommendation

9.1 Education and Youth Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- consider the contents of the report; and
- consider the effectiveness, sufficiency and future sustainability of ALN support across Bridgend County Borough.

Background Documents

None